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Going into the second week of enforced silence at the writer's conference at the University of the South began to have ridiculous effects. My tongue lolled over to one side of my mouth and my voice box started making dry scratchy noises like fox squirrels playing in a rain gutter.

One morning, an English gentleman from a British university tried to distract me by telling this tale: "This lad was speechless like yourself," he said, "until a servant spilled a bowl of hot porridge down his back. In the disruption, the mother and sisters screamed and a chamber lady fainted." He claimed the boy rallied, and for the first time in all his 11 years spoke these words: "Madam, the agony has abated."

The compelling force of the whole conference, in my opinion, was Horton Foote's workshop. Mr. Foote's play, "The Man From Atlanta," won the Pulitzer prize this year, in case you have forgotten. Other credits of his are the screen version of "To Kill A Mockingbird," and his play and subsequent movie entitled "A Trip To Bountiful." Mr. Foote is virtually a living history of 60 or so years of the American theater. He is the epitome of a fine bred Southern writer from East Texas. No play or skit tried his patience. Pained by advanced age, he sat and stood during the two-hour sessions, yet gave all the novices time to perform portions of their work.

His bones weren't all that must have hurt. One dashing New Yorker opened her drama by explaining that the audience was dead and her cast was either mummies or dummies, I couldn't hear which. "Offstage," she directed, "a street dog howled at the stuck horn of a taxicab." The guy sitting in the next chair lost control and fell over, face down on a coffee table. He kept gasping and slapping his hands against the table. I feared he was going to collapse from the paroxysm of such deep laughter.

Dead audiences aren't funny, I don't care what some slick New York dame thinks. One time in Pawhuska, Oklahoma, I sat up on the stage of a darkened movie theater in front of a bunch of cow herders, the whole audience jaded by late hours and strenuous convention behavior, and watched the room die. By the time an economist from Oklahoma University read over an hour's worth of the minute details of market failures and a U.S. Senator campaigning for reelection retold past accomplishments in the chambers of Congress for the past 10 sessions, the New Year's fireworks display at Times Square wouldn't have roused those herders, much less my report from the shortgrass country.

The New York lady's play ended when the battery ran down on the cab and a dogcatcher captured the dog. She, the author, turned to Mr. Foote and became the first student to have the temerity to address him by his first name: "Horton, I guess you have a lot of comment about my play."

Blossoming into his best stage smile, he replied, "No Miss, your talent exceeds my expertise and is beyond the realm of my experiences."

The drama workshop was the farthest walk from my dorm, and I walked to all lectures and classes. Also, breakfast wasn't until 7 a.m., so I struck out every morning across the golf course and out along the lookout trails over the valleys below the plateau. No plan was necessary as the area was safe and secluded from modern problems.

A time or two I skirted households, where old Spud or old Skip was out on patrol, watching for a chance to sample a man's hindleg through a pair of khaki trousers. I grew careless as the neighborhoods became familiar, and one morning out past the cemetery, a brute of a Rottweiler dog charged down off a hill, his growl rumbling through a mouth full of saliva and his black and tan coat bristling in hate. Just as he reached the street, I stopped a van and stepped in the side door before it halted. The driver said the dog's owner was under police orders to keep the dog locked in a pen.

I carry a whistle in my pocket to stun the eardrums of over-eager watchdogs. But when a dog as huge as a Rottweiler attacks, your breathing becomes so labored, the whistle only sputters and makes the dog think he's flushed a big butterfly or scared up a harmless grasshopper, instead of matched a fight.

Back at the dorm, I called the police. The dispatcher said Rottweilers are against the law at Sewanee. She promised immediate attention to the infraction. I also warned a lady going out to run to watch for the dog. She replied, "Rottweiler puppies are the sweetest things in this world." Her roommate asked, "just what did you do to make the dog mad, Monte?"

I told her what I did to make the dog maddest was to foil his attack by escaping in a GMC van. "Taillights," I explained, "can be mighty infuriating to a man-eating dog."